

White Paper

Policy settings for supporting foundation learning

March 2022

About Us

Ako Aotearoa is the National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence and represents a unique viewpoint and voice for the tertiary education sector. We welcome the opportunity to work alongside our partners and stakeholders in contributing to future solutions. Our history of research, advocacy and support in tertiary education over many years traverses broad fields of knowledge, sectors and success for priority learner groups. With a specific focus on teaching and learning, our research and expertise can contribute significantly to reconceptualising teaching and learning in a renewed vocational education system.

Every year, Ako Aotearoa manages the national [Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awards \(TTEA\)](#) where the [country's top tertiary educators](#) are celebrated. These awards have been revamped and launched in February 2022 as [Te Whatu Kairangi](#) – the Aotearoa Tertiary Educator Awards. Ako Aotearoa also provides wide-ranging [professional learning and development programmes](#) on Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Kaupapa Māori, Māori Cultural Capability, Māori learner success, Pacific learner success, teaching strategies, technology and online learning, mentoring and assessment. Ako Aotearoa is the [Qualification Developer](#) for most qualifications in the NZQA Teacher Education suite. Search our [Knowledge Centre](#) for innovative resources to support teaching and learning success. We also host and co-host regular strategic forums and events, including [Tuia Te Ako](#), [Pacific Tertiary Education Fono](#), [Talking Teaching](#) and the [NZ Vocational Education and Training Research Forum](#).

Ako Aotearoa has designed and developed a coherent system to help practitioners and organisations better support learners in foundation education. This includes [specialised professional learning](#) on developing language, literacy and numeracy, [online communities of practice](#) and the [New Zealand Dyslexia-Friendly Quality Mark](#). In 2022 we plan to launch a new service for organisations under the model [Tapatoru Ako Professional Practice Awards](#) for tertiary educators.

For more information about us visit our website: www.ako.ac.nz. Watch videos about us in [Te Reo Māori](#) and [English](#).

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1. Introduction

Tēnā koe e te Minita e te Rangatira,

Ako Aotearoa presents this white paper because we are concerned that the current policy settings for the foundation learning, vocational, and trades training tertiary sector do not sufficiently allow for the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) and Ako Aotearoa to meet current sector need in building the capability of education and training organisations and educators to provide quality, culturally responsive Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) support to learners. We are also constrained by the policy settings in our ability to fully meet sector need.

2. White paper on policy settings for supporting foundation learning

This paper highlights the increasing challenges faced by the foundation learning, vocational, and trades training tertiary sector in meeting the educational needs of lower-skilled adult learners and calls for action to meet these challenges. This paper also draws attention to the growing inequity of identified TEC priority groups, including Māori, Pacific peoples, and disabled learners, and outlines recommendations to develop the capability of the foundation sector to respond to the LLN needs of learners, and develop the cultural competencies needed to support Māori and Pacific learners.

As a result of the TEC restructure, some of TEC's internal expertise in LLN has been lost. In addition, the Literacy and Numeracy Implementation Strategy, which expired in 2019, was not renewed. This has led to a lack of direction for LLN provision, with the sector now looking to Ako Aotearoa's Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Cultural Capability (ALNACC) team to provide guidance and support. We have been working closely with the TEC to provide the advisory work needed, and to assist the TEC in leading the sector in this space. Various events, such as the Review of Vocational Education (RoVE), the TEC restructure, and COVID-19, have led to a period of neglect, and a vacuum, over the past few years, at the policy and strategy levels. During this time, there has also been a significant slippage of organisational and educator capability within the sector. If we are to meet the objectives set out in our Tertiary Education Strategy (TES), this needs to be addressed urgently.

3. State of the sector in 2022

Over the past four years, Ako Aotearoa's ALNACC team has worked closely with the sector, both at the organisational and educator level, and developed a body of research with strong connections to the Māori community and Pacific peoples' communities. We have summarised our main findings on the state of the sector below.

Many organisations lack clear leadership on how to meet the needs of learners with low LLN skills, neurodiverse learners, or disabled learners. At the organisational level, there is common uncertainty regarding how to assess, diagnose, and monitor learner development using the LNAAT, or how to meet the TEC funding criteria guidelines (TEC, 2017). There is widespread confusion about the process and actions required to embed literacy and numeracy at the programme and delivery level. There is little awareness of the ability to collect, analyse, and act on assessment data to inform teaching. Organisational leadership has interpreted TEC silence as a signal that literacy, numeracy, and cultural competencies are 'not so important', which has resulted in a rapid decline of quality embedded literacy and numeracy provision.

Also, educators working with learners have little educational training, and even less literacy and numeracy training. Typically, educators are industry experts, with little awareness of the literacy and numeracy demands required for their own vocations. In some cases, they lack the essential LLN skills themselves. Educators constantly report that they are not equipped

to meet the needs of learners presenting with low LLN skills, and express frustration at the high rates of learner difficulty, and dropout. We should note that these educators develop these skills quickly when engaged in professional development. This is not a criticism of educators, but to point out that content experts also require pedagogical and LLN training when working with lower-skilled adult learners.

Lastly, organisations and educators are seeking support to develop their cultural competency skills to better engage and support Māori and Pacific learners. The TEC prioritised both Māori and Pacific peoples due to inequitable educational outcomes that led to a range of social, economic, and health disparities. The COVID-19 crisis is exacerbating this inequity, yet the initiatives to address this have been too limited in scope, leading to minimal progress and leaving many parts of the sector ill-equipped to meet the challenge. We, and sector stakeholders, believe the values-based, learner-centred approach embedded into Tapatoru (Ako Aotearoa, 2020) provides a coherent and progressive framework to effect lasting change.

4. We must do more to support successful learner journeys

The successful journey of a learner through the foundation-level tertiary sector and the transition to further training or employment is directly linked to a wide range of positive social and economic outcomes for the individual, their whānau, and Aotearoa New Zealand's wider economic and social growth. Foundation-level education and training can be likened to a pipeline with multiple inputs, supporting and developing learners throughout the process.

This education and training pipeline is key to:

- addressing social, cultural, and economic disparities found within Aotearoa (e.g., TEC priority groups, such as Māori, Pacific peoples, and learners with disabilities)
- supporting the holistic wellbeing of foundation learners to ensure learner success
- responding to the diverse needs of foundation learners through creating inclusive teaching and learning environments
- supplying essential skills to a wide range of industries, enabling economic growth and stability.

The effectiveness of the pipeline to meet these objectives is under pressure due to three primary challenges.

5. Three primary challenges

The **first challenge** is the constant demand for higher skills across industries, fuelled by advances in technology, dispersed management structures, globalisation, and a range of social and economic factors. A recent OECD (2021a) report expanded on the notion of minimal skills (transversal skills), concluding that analytical skills, problem-solving skills, and digital skills are not merely desired, but *essential* in the post-COVID-19 environment. As the need for essential LLN skills for employees increases, the tertiary foundation education system struggles to uphold previous levels.

The **second challenge** is that adults entering the workforce require not only the vocational skills to gain employment, but also a bundle of independent learning skills, including LLN and learner agency skills, that will enable them to continue to learn over their life course. Recent OECD (2021a) research finds that adults who are unable to engage in lifelong learning are now highly likely to suffer social and economic marginalisation. The OECD (2020) recommends prioritising 'skills for the future' (learner agency, self-management skills, autonomy) because

lower-skilled students are unable to adequately learn online in the absence of face-to-face teaching. One local example of this growing concern is the negative impact the COVID lockdowns have had on the attendance and performance of Māori and Pacific learners (Ministry of Education, 2020). The OECD (2021b) warns that, when learners who are already disadvantaged enter tertiary training after two years of disrupted education, the educational disparities are likely to be even greater. Note that the urgency for learner agency skills is also reflected in the 2019 Employment Strategy, including the need for continuous upskilling and retraining across the lifespan (Ministry of Social Development and Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2019).

The **third challenge** is that the number of adults with low levels of literacy and numeracy skills entering tertiary education and training appears to be increasing. High proportions of foundation-level learners have low levels of literacy and numeracy. This is causing them to fail to complete programmes, transition into further training, and gain or maintain employment. Hard data and anecdotal feedback from industries and training providers reveal that this problem is growing and undermining the training pipeline. Recent PIAAC data (PIAAC, 2017), TIMSS (NZMaths, 2020), and PISA data (Ministry of Education, 2017) suggest an upsurge in the trend in the coming years. It is also suggested that, due to COVID-19-related issues, there will be a rise in the number of young people entering foundation-level training who will have missed a significant amount of their schooling over the previous two years. A potential tsunami of low-skilled youth will enter the training pipeline in the coming years.

6. The role of Ako Aotearoa and the need to build sustainable sector capability

Ako Aotearoa, as New Zealand's National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence, is well situated within the sector to help address the issues discussed above. Ako Aotearoa possesses the historical knowledge developed over the past decades of investment. This includes knowledge of the infrastructure, qualifications, tools and resources, relevant research, evidence-based approaches to embedding literacy and numeracy, cultural competencies in relation to foundation-level education, funding streams, and experience in working across all industries and with tertiary providers at all levels. Additionally, Ako Aotearoa has incorporated this knowledge into a professional practice framework that is designed as a mechanism to develop and sustain sector capability, to drive the professionalisation of the sector, set expectations, raise capability, promote reflective practice, and build on the solid foundation already provided through previous investment.

The challenges outlined above can be addressed by developing the capability of foundation-level educators. A large and growing body of research demonstrates that the educator is the primary factor for learner success, even more so with lower-skilled learners.¹ It is the educator who develops the relationships, assesses and diagnoses need, develops learning plans, implements instructional strategies, and monitors and adapts instruction based on feedback. Currently, foundation-level educators are not adequately supported to meet the challenge presented by lower-skilled adults and the higher learning demands of the workplace or society. Ako Aotearoa specialises in raising educator capability, possessing the tools, resources, and experience to do so, and aims to collaborate with sector stakeholders to help build more flexible pathways for capability building, that are better aligned to the professional development needs of educators.²

¹ <https://ako.ac.nz/assets/ALNACC/Files-for-TEC-presentation-31-March-2021/Teacher-quality-as-a-primary-factor-in-learner-success.pdf>

² https://ako.ac.nz/assets/ALNACC/211020-Pathways-to-capability-building-in-foundation-education_Discussion-paper.pdf

7. Government investments in building sector capability in foundation education

Previous TEC literacy and numeracy strategies (e.g., TEC, 2015) worked successfully over the past two decades to develop sector capability and improve quality systems. These strategies were supported by a substantial financial investment and have resulted in the development of significant educational assets and a world-class LLN and cultural capability infrastructure. This comprises the Adult Learning Progressions for Literacy and Numeracy, the Literacy and Numeracy for Adults Assessment Tool (LNAAT), Adult Literacy and Numeracy Education (ALNE) qualifications, Pathways Awarua, LLN resources, and a dedicated professional development service tasked with building organisational and educational capability. These initiatives were supported by Ministry of Education policy and clear messaging by a dedicated team of TEC Literacy and Numeracy Advisors.

The TEC's Literacy and Numeracy Implementation Strategy is out-of-date. This is a failure of leadership at a time of change when the education and training sector most needs clear signals to demonstrably support the success of a diverse learner group.

Sadly, the investment in professional development has been considerably downscaled over recent years, from \$3.5 million p.a. in 2009, when the National Centre of Literacy and Numeracy for Adults was established, to a mere \$1.15 million p.a. currently. Given the urgent need for upskilling the sector, adequate funding needs to be in place.

Despite the funding limitations, since 2018 Ako Aotearoa's ALNACC team has managed, under its TEC contract and through cost-recovery charges, to develop a suite of assets to add to the existing infrastructure, including an indigenous cultural competency model for improving sector capability, the Capability Building model, the Tapatoru Ako Professional Practice Awards, the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Effective Practice Model, and Learner Agency resources, to help build educator capability in supporting foundation learning. More information can be found in Appendix 1.

Next, in section 8 we outline several recommendations that would help achieve significant progress in raising the capability of the foundation tertiary sector.

8. There is a need to undertake five urgent actions

1. Support our call to reprioritise adult language, literacy and numeracy, and cultural capability as a national imperative, supported with policy from the Ministry of Education and funding from Vote Education.
2. Ask officials to develop a LLN implementation strategy, setting clear objectives and milestones, that builds on the previous 2015–2019 strategy.
3. Increase funding of key projects that help grow and further evolve services available to support the foundation education and training sector and build sector capability, including the ALNACC programme. For example, increasing professional development opportunities that build on the existing infrastructure, underpinned by the implementation of the Tapatoru framework.
4. Dedicate the Adult Literacy Educator Fund to organisations and educators committing to engage in professional development in LLN education and cultural capability.
5. Fund educator participation in professional development programmes supported with Ako Aotearoa digital badges. Note, these programmes are specifically designed to address immediate issues in the sector and have received overwhelmingly positive feedback from the sector.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further with you and your officials.

Nō reira, tēnā koe e te Minita.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Helen Lomax', written in a cursive style.

Nā Helen Lomax, Director, Ako Aotearoa

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Appendix 1

Examples of assets that comprise the infrastructure for embedding LLN and cultural capability include:

- The Adult Learning Progressions for Adult Literacy and Numeracy, which form the basis for the Literacy and Numeracy for Adults Assessment Tool (LNAAT) and New Zealand's approach to embedding literacy and numeracy: <https://ako.ac.nz/knowledge-centre/learning-progressions-for-adult-literacy/>
- The various platforms that the TEC has supported to build sector capability include the LNAAT and Pathways Awarua. These are independent platforms that have different roles and perform different tasks. The LNAAT platform requires significant upgrades and a new direction to remain fit-for-purpose. Pathways Awarua continues to be maintained and upgraded.
- The Adult Literacy and Numeracy Effective Practice Model describes best practice across all aspects of adult literacy and numeracy in a range of contexts. It draws on and integrates the existing Adult Literacy and Numeracy Progressions, resources, tools, and infrastructure to ensure educators are fully informed: (<https://ako.ac.nz/assets/ALNACC/REPORT-ALN-Effective-Practice-Model.pdf>)
- The Tapatoru is a professional practice framework, which integrates the existing infrastructure, and Mātauranga Māori, to recognise and develop educator experience and expertise: (<https://ako.ac.nz/about-us/alnacc/tapatoru-ako-professional-practice-award/>)
- The Māori Cultural Capability Pathway and the Pacific Cultural Centredness Pathway are free resources for educators to build their cultural capability. They are hosted on the Pathways Awarua website. Ako Aotearoa offers a suite of professional development offerings to support educators in applying the values and strategies described in the pathways.
- The Capability Building Model draws on the learnings of the previous 20 years of literacy and numeracy strategy and national and international research to describe a best practice approach to enhancing foundation-learning capability building: (<https://ako.ac.nz/assets/ALNACC/SUMMARY-Capability-Building-model.pdf>)
- The Learner Agency thinkpiece explores integrating learner agency with LLN provision in order to equip the tertiary sector, organisations, practitioners, and learners, for the challenges of future learning and work: <https://ako.ac.nz/assets/News-and-Success-stories/Learner-agency-in-adult-foundation-level-education.pdf>
- The Ako Aotearoa website stores and disseminates the resources and research developed over the 14 years for the tertiary sector.

Nā āheitanga ā-mātauranga,
ko angitū ā-ākonga
Building educational capability
for learner success

Ako
AOTEAROA